

*Please share your stories about how Open Access to this article benefits you.*

# The “Curse” of Eastern Blood in Ismail Kadare’s Elegy for Kosovo.

by Ani Kokobobo

2010

This is the published version of the article, made available with the permission of the publisher. The original published version can be found at the link below.

Kokobobo, Ani. (2010) The “Curse of Eastern Blood in Ismail Kadare’s Elegy for Kosovo. *Ulbandus Review*, 13, 79-93.

Published version: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25748215>

Terms of Use: <http://www2.ku.edu/~scholar/docs/license.shtml>

# The “Curse” of Eastern Blood in Ismail Kadare’s *Elegy for Kosovo*.

Ani Kokobobo  
Columbia University

As Maria Todorova concludes in her study *Imagining the Balkans*, despite being bound to Europe geographically, the Balkans are often “culturally constructed (by the West) as the other within.”<sup>1</sup> Over the years, violence and particularly violent infighting have grown into a “leitmotiv”<sup>2</sup> for Balkan otherness, as the area and its people have been “popularly defined by violence, incivility, even barbarism.”<sup>3</sup> The associations of the region with violence grew into a defining characteristic during the end of the nineteenth-century, and continued to rise to prominence during the Balkan Wars at the beginning of the twentieth-century. These patterns of thinking about the Balkans returned to dominate public discourse after the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, as well as the subsequent violent conflicts in Kosovo. In fact, as Tomislav Longinović shows in his study *Vampires Like Us: Writing Down “the serbs,”*<sup>4</sup> the Kosovo crisis coupled with the NATO intervention that followed, led to representations and demonizations of Serbs in the Western press as savage or vampiric *others*.

Scholars construe such perceptions of the Balkans as Europe’s *other* to be a variant of Orientalist thinking, comparable to Western perceptions of the “Orient” as defined by Edward Saïd. Saïd argues that Orientalism is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.”<sup>5</sup> In Saïd’s understanding, the Western experience of the Orient consists of “setting itself against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”<sup>6</sup> The image of the Orient has thus less to do with its people or culture, than with the Western European need for a point of contrast to its own identity. Nor is the Western construction of the Orient limited to discourse alone. As Saïd argues, this construct becomes a way for Europe to dominate the

---

<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>3</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden, “Orientalist Variations on the Theme ‘Balkans’: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics,” *Slavic Review* 51, 1992, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Vampires Like Us: Writing Down “the serbs”* (Belgrade: Belgrade Circle 2005.)

<sup>5</sup> *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 1

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

East, to control it verbally as well as socially and politically.<sup>7</sup> In this schema, then, the Balkans are clumped with Eastern cultures in the role of the European ‘other.’ In the case of the Balkans, instead of “orientalism” we face a phenomenon like “balkanism,” which was devised by Todorova to account for the lack of colonial experience in the Balkans and for the added nuances of violent infighting.<sup>8</sup>

The existence and persistence of such models in the Western mindset raises the question of how outside perceptions influence Balkan self-perception. “It is virtually axiomatic,” writes Todorova, “that, by and large, a negative self-perception hovers over the Balkans next to a strongly disapproving and disparaging outside perception.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Balkan nations do not simply internalize negative outside perceptions, but also the Orientalist schema as a whole. Versions of Orientalism exist among Balkan peoples, enabling Balkan nations to characterize their neighbors as more or less Eastern, and thus construct their own identity as Western. (Such labels have little or nothing to do with actual geography.)

Bakić-Hayden (1995) has developed the notion of “nesting orientalisms” to explicate this phenomenon. She characterizes “nesting orientalisms” as a “pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised.” In this pattern, Asia is more ‘East’ or other than Eastern Europe; within Eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced and the Balkans are perceived as most Eastern.<sup>10</sup> Such patterns have a profound effect on how the various ‘others’ of Europe view neighboring nations. Todorova, who extends Bakić-Hayden’s scheme of “nesting orientalisms” by applying its principles to individual Balkan nations, argues that the following patterns of shifting orientalism are persistent in the region. She sketches out an entire East/West gradation as it applies to Balkan nations. According to this model:

A Serb is an “Easterner” to a Slovene, but a Bosnian could be an “Easterner” to a Serb although geographically situated to the West; the same applies to the Albanians who, situated in the western Balkans, are perceived as Easternmost by the rest of the Balkan nations [...] With the exception of the Turks, in whose self-identity the East occupies a definite, although intensely discussed, place, all other Balkan nations have renounced what they perceive as East and think of themselves as, if incompletely Western, certainly not Eastern [...] Although competing in their pretense to be more “European” than the rest, and creating their internal hierarchies of more or

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Todorova 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54 (1995), 918.



less “orientalized” members, the only constituents who are brandished by an ultimate and absolute “orientalness” are the Turks.<sup>11</sup>

If this Orientalist schema casts Slovenia as the most ‘Western’ Balkan country, then it simultaneously corners Albania and leaves it with fewer ‘others’ to assist the buildup of a positive self-image. Serbs use the Bosnians as their Eastern others, the Slovenes use the Serbs, whereas Albanians are left with relatively fewer nation-scapegoats. Certainly, construing everyone else as Eastern and oneself as fundamentally European is always a way to negotiate such a cultural conundrum. The various nationalistic theories that posit modern-day Albanians as the descendants of the ancient Pelasgians – about whom, incidentally, we know very little archaeologically and historically – and thus the oldest, most autochthonous nation in the Balkans, is one possible response to being forced in the Eastern corner.

But there is also another possibility. Over the years, every modernization initiative in Albania has been profoundly Orientalist in nature. This discourse had its beginnings in the Albanian National Renaissance during the nineteenth-century, when Albanian intellectuals saw Albania as Western and the occupying Ottoman Empire as Eastern.<sup>12</sup> Albanian Renaissance poets like Naim Frashëri paint a picture of medieval Albania prior to the Ottoman occupation as an oasis of Western civilization. This medieval Albania is a land in which “wisdom, peace, prosperity, honor, justice, love, friendship...” reign.<sup>13</sup> Yet, just at this pivotal time, the Ottoman Empire came to disrupt Albania’s progress. “A great savagery came out of Asia,” writes Frashëri about the Ottoman Empire. He then continues by saying that the Ottoman Empire put an end to the Albanian era of peace and prosperity as it “covered the world with a shadow.”<sup>14</sup> The Eastern enemy is depicted as bringing violence and misery wherever it sets foot.

This obviously Orientalist scheme of idyllic medieval Albania, whose bright future was derailed by the Eastern other, was perpetuated both during Ahmet Zogu’s reign and during Enver Hoxha’s socialist regime in Albania. In fact, despite vast differences between their political agendas and leadership styles, both leaders presented their political endeavors as modernization campaigns. Specifically, they presented their own governments as efforts to rid Albania of Eastern backwardness.

<sup>11</sup> Todorova 58.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of Orientalism in Albania, see: Enis Sulstarova, “Orientalizmi shqiptar” (Albanian Orientalism), *Përpyjekja* (The Endeavor), vol. 20, 2005, 42-60.

<sup>13</sup> *Vëpra*, vol. 3, eds. N. Rahmani, F. Gunga, R. Qosja (Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1986), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



In this essay I consider how these Orientalist cultural tendencies appear in Ismail Kadare's (1998) *Elegy for Kosovo*.<sup>15</sup> Written after the 1998 Kosovo crisis, Kadare's tale is driven by a highly Orientalist worldview. Culpability for one of the most significant instances of Balkan violence in the twentieth-century is removed from the Balkan peoples involved in it, while blame is assigned to the Eastern other. The Turk is this other responsible for Balkan violence, whereas the Balkans are depicted as originally European, the “roots of Europe” painfully torn from the continent and placed on a path of self-annihilation by the Ottomans. Though Kadare's piece does not account for the entire Albanian reaction to the Kosovo crisis, it nevertheless reveals that Orientalist patterns of thinking remain viable in post-socialist Albania, and are still employed as a way to conceptualize the unfamiliar grounds of contemporary history.

### Rewriting Myth

Though written in response to a contemporary conflict, Kadare's *Elegy for Kosovo* does not approach contemporary events directly but is framed as a narrative about the beginning and aftermath of the legendary Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This chronological regression is perhaps logical considering that modern territorial debates in Kosovo have always been intimately connected to the historical battle and its symbolic significance for Serbian national identity. As we know, the Serbian perception of Kosovo has been shaped by the mythology surrounding the lost battle in 1389. As Charles Simić has put it, while “[o]ther people sing of the triumphs of their conquering heroes [...] the Serbs sing of the tragic sense of life,” and paradoxically “celebrate defeat.”<sup>16</sup>

The decasyllabic epic cycle about the Battle of Kosovo tells of how on the day of the battle the Serbian prince Lazar was faced with two, almost Christ-like choices. He could choose a kingdom on earth and thus defeat the Ottoman armies against whom the Serbs (and other Balkan nations) were standing in battle. Or, he could choose a heavenly kingdom, lose the battle, and martyr himself. Like Christ before him, Lazar chose the second alternative and led his men into battle knowing that only a tragic outcome could result. Yet, due to this willing sacrifice, even though the Battle of Kosovo paved the way for Ottoman occupation of the

---

<sup>15</sup> The original Albanian title was *Tri këngë xie për Kosovën*, which is why it is sometimes also translated as *Three Elegies for Kosovo*.

<sup>16</sup> “Preface,” *The Battle of Kosovo: Serbian Epic Poems*, trans. John Matthias, Vladeta Vuckovic (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 2 September, 2010 [http://balkania.tripod.com/resources/history/battle\\_of\\_kosovo.html](http://balkania.tripod.com/resources/history/battle_of_kosovo.html)

region, it has been glorified in the Serbian national imagination as an instance of much-celebrated martyrdom. As Longinović (1995) has argued, “the glorious defeat on the battlefield [was] transformed into a founding myth of the Serbian nation.”<sup>17</sup> There are obvious Christian overtones to Lazar’s self-sacrifice and renouncement of worldly power, so over the year the battle has assumed special significance in Serbian cultural memory, while the site of Kosovo has become a Serbian Jerusalem of sorts.

When placed against this background, Kadare’s rewriting of the history of the battle, a rewriting informed by the 1998 crisis, is also a stark reinterpretation of a moment with tremendous symbolic weight in Serbian consciousness. Kadare initially narrates the disastrous defeat at the field of battle, and then proceeds to tell the aftermath of Kosovo through the eyes of two Balkan minstrels forced to migrate toward Western Europe. Though Kadare retains some important details of the original Kosovo epic cycle – such as the death of king Lazar on the battlefield – he also substantially reworks the traditional epic. In fact, though Simić suggests that the epic cycle of Kosovo was inspired by an inner sense of realism in the Serbian nation about the inherently tragic nature of life, it is in the Kadarean rewriting that one can truly feel a sense of cold realism in this tale; a prosaic, unheroic realism that epic poetry could not provide.

In *Elegy for Kosovo* king Lazar is not a martyr who enters the battlefield to be willingly butchered. Rather, he emerges as a shrewd tactician who has forged several alliances in order to attain military success. This transformation of Lazar from self-martyring prince to battlefield strategist strips him of his heroic status in the original poems. Indeed, he is now merely one ruler among many, and with his demotion, the story of the battle loses its Serbian-centric nature. Thus instead of rendering the Battle of Kosovo as a significant event in Serbian history, Kadare depicts this battle as a crucial turning-point for all Balkan people, that altered their history and collective identity. In lieu of Serbian self-sacrifice, this rendering of the battle tells of unified Balkan nations at war against a common enemy: the Ottoman Turks.

In so doing, Kadare downplays the regional infighting that already plagued the Balkans even as early as the fourteenth-century. In fact, the Serbian defeat at the 1371 Battle of Marica, a precursor to the Battle of Kosovo, was largely due to the factionalism between two members of the Serbian nobility, the brothers Vikašin and Ugljesa, who realized too late

---

<sup>17</sup> “East Within West: Bosnian Cultural Identity in the Works of Ivo Andrić,” *Ivo Andrić Revisited: The Bridge Still Stands*, ed. Wayne Vucinich (Berkeley: UC Berkeley International and Area Studies, 1995) 134.



the need for local unity, and perished together at the hands of Sultan Murad’s marshal Evrenos.<sup>18</sup> Kadare briefly hints at such antagonistic rapports from the period, by showing that Serbs and Albanians have utterly contrasting views of regional history. The Albanian minstrel sings calling his countrymen to arms because the Serbs are taking Kosovo, while the Serbian minstrel calls the Serbs to arms because the Albanians are taking Kosovo. Such polarized views of history might have been relevant in a proper discussion of the contemporary Kosovo crisis since they have undermined efforts of reconciliation or dialogue between Serbs and Albanians, yet in Kadare’s story these songs of Balkan hostility are not treated seriously by protagonists. One is hard-pressed to find animosity between Balkan rulers in Kadare’s descriptions of the eve of battle. As the Balkan princes prepare for the next day’s fighting, the minstrels sing traditional songs about Balkan infighting while their leaders joke about the confusion. And when after the disastrous battle the two minstrel-historians set off for Europe, not only do they join hands as “brothers,” but the Serbian minstrel borrows the Albanian lute for his songs after having lost his own *gusla*.

This sense of Balkan togetherness is persistent throughout the story. All the soldiers who fight the battle bear symbols of their individual regions, but miraculously manage to fight together as one and ultimately share a communal tragic fate. Similarly, the group of Balkan refugees journeying toward Western Europe band together through their mass, pan-Balkan exodus. The message then is clear: at this stage, the Balkan people are as one, fighting against a common enemy who represents a threat to their civilization.

In fact, the protagonists of the story seem capable of tremendous wisdom regarding Balkan factionalism. The awareness that fighting one another is likely the reason for the defeat at Kosovo is apparent throughout the tale and overwhelms antagonistic impulses. As the Albanian minstrel says to the Serbian one: “We ourselves have brought this disaster upon our heads, my brother! We have been fighting and slaughtering each other for so many years over Kosovo, and now Kosovo has fallen to others.”<sup>19</sup> At the face of communal defeat, the Balkan people realize, much too late, that they have more in common than initially suspected. So instead of serving as the “founding myth of the Serbian nation,” and as such, perhaps as a polarizing historical moment, in

<sup>18</sup> John Matthias, “Introduction,” *The Battle of Kosovo: Serbian Epic Poems*, trans. John Matthias, Vladeta Vuckovic (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 2 September, 2010 [http://balkania.tripod.com/resources/history/battle\\_of\\_kosovo.html](http://balkania.tripod.com/resources/history/battle_of_kosovo.html).

<sup>19</sup> Ismail Kadare, *Elegy for Kosovo*, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000), 68.



Kadare's retelling, the battle of Kosovo is reconstituted as a common Balkan crisis against a much more threatening enemy.

### Blood Brotherhood

In Kadare's view, this enemy is the Ottoman Empire, the "Eastern" other whose victory in Kosovo produces catastrophic results. To return to my previous claim about the corrective realism in Kadare's work, and as the work's title might also reveal, Kadare's focus in *Elegy for Kosovo* is not so much on the spiritual victory emphasized in folklore, but rather on the literal loss of the battle itself. Though this loss may have been reconceptualized as a spiritual victory in the Serbian cultural imagination, Kadare invites us to look at the hard cold facts. What he emphasizes is that the Balkan people were *all* fully and utterly brought to their knees by the Battle of Kosovo. At the end of the battle the minstrels describe the "all-engulfing darkness" that sets upon the world. "Down there death is everywhere," declare people fleeing from the Balkans, as the minstrels receive news of the fall of each Balkan state. Serbia is "in utter disarray" and "only half of Albania [is] still holding out."<sup>20</sup> The Slovenes and the Croats have not fallen yet, but they too, just like the overthrown princes, "[have] bowed their heads to the Turkish sultan."<sup>21</sup> The site of the battle has also been transformed, as rumors spread that the land will now be renamed "Muradie" in honor of Sultan Murad.<sup>22</sup> This prophesied change of name already foreshadows the vast transformation that Kadare traces in the Balkans as a result of the catastrophic loss in Kosovo; the repercussions of the battle extend beyond the fourteenth-century all the way to the twentieth, shaping the past and present of the area. As Kadare sees it, the Eastern victory at the Battle of Kosovo stained the land and permanently tainted its future.

A number of developments in the story suggest that by losing the battle and essentially becoming vassals of an Eastern power, the Balkan nations were condemned to many future misfortunes. For one, we learn that at the end of the battle, the Ottoman sultan is treacherously murdered by his own men, while his younger son Bayezid participates in the murder plot of his older brother, the heir apparent to the throne. Unlike his father and older brother, Bayezid is a representative of a political faction of the empire that propagates westward expansion rather than isolation within Asia. As the narrator notes, the new ruler's desire to

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 74.

conquer Europe will produce negative consequences for the Balkans. The future promises no respite under the dominion of a ruler who intends to utilize the Balkans as his pathway into Western Europe. To do so, the sultan needs to completely possess the Balkans, make the land his own.

In fact, these future political agendas seem to be already set into motion, and this complete possession of the Balkans by the Eastern other, need not wait until future years. The new sultan begins his campaign to make region Ottoman immediately after the battle. Here Kadare sketches out one of those unsolved and unsolvable mysteries so familiar to readers of his works. When they depart the Balkans, the Ottomans take back to Istanbul for proper burial only the outer shell of the murdered sultan while burying his insides in the Plains of Kosovo. In a special “supplement” to the story of the battle, the narrator informs us that:

[The] monarch's body [was] taken to the Ottoman capital but that his blood and intestines [were] buried in Christian soil of Kosovo [...] Balkan people believe that everything linked with blood is eternal, imperishable, and guarded by fate. The Turks, who had at that point interacted with the Balkan people for over half a century had apparently assimilated some of this symbolism. By pouring the monarch's blood on the Plains of Kosovo, they wanted to give that plain, just as they had done with the invasion, a direction, a fatality, both a curse and blessing at the same time; in other words, a "program," as one would call it today.<sup>23</sup>

Kadare never fully explains this bizarre act; it is, as I have mentioned, one of his essential narrative mysteries, yet he alludes to a few possible answers.

I would suggest that one way to understand the burial of the sultan's blood in the Balkan land is from the perspective of traditional Balkan and especially Albanian cultural rituals and beliefs involving blood. Albanian blood vengeance laws require that spilt blood be repaid with blood, so one may argue that the Ottomans leave their monarch's blood in the Balkan Peninsula lest it vengefully rise up against them. But Kadare implies that even in this token Balkan appropriation, the Ottoman intentions go deeper and are much more sinister. Blood, after all, holds tremendous power. Indeed, in the words of the deceased monarch crying out from the Plains of Kosovo: “even a few drops of blood are enough to hold all the memory of the world” (121). From this perspective, then, to leave behind the blood of the monarch constitutes giving a “program” to the region, binding its fate to that of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 44.

not only invade or possess, but they seek a blood union with the Balkans; they seek to impregnate the land of Kosovo with the Ottoman DNA.

In Balkan tradition the sort of blood-union rendered in Kadare's story has many important connotations. The belief that by drinking one another's blood two individual become joined in "blood-brotherhood" is widespread throughout the Balkans. In the Albanian medieval law code – the Kanun (Code) of Lek Dugagjini – the practice is for two men to drink each other's blood, sometimes on top of a sugar cube, and then become as brothers. So strong is this bond considered that intermarriage is not allowed among the families of the blood brothers for at least several generations because they are viewed as blood relatives. In instances when blood-vengeance is forgiven, this same ritual of blood drinking takes place, and it is only through the ensuing blood-brotherhood between the feuding parties that the death of a loved one (blood taken) can be forgiven. The relatedness among families that results from the ritual, makes up for the blood taken through new relatives. In light of these practices, the blood of the Sultan on Balkan land, and the land's essential absorption or 'drinking' of the Ottoman blood, suggests that a coerced blood brotherhood has taken place between the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Stain of Eastern Blood**

For Kadare, however, this involuntary brotherhood of the Balkans with the Ottoman Empire proves to have had extremely negative ramifications for the Balkans, essentially dragging the region into Easternness. In order to allude to this point he merges this otherwise realistic tale with the magical realism he is known for. At the end of the tale, Kadare gives voice to the ghost of the sultan buried in the Balkans, who delivers a "royal prayer." The spirit of Sultan Murad bemoans the fact that his blood and insides have been trapped in the Balkans. And because this portion of the tale is told from the perspective of Murad's spirit, temporal laws no longer apply, and the narrative kaleidoscopically flashes through Balkan history, beginning with the Battle of Kosovo and continuing up to the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo. The sultan narrates the long aftermath of the Battle of Kosovo, tracing violent infighting in the Balkans through some six hundred years.

As an observer of the region, the sultan mentions that the Balkan people have been on a "course of destruction" for hundreds of years,



“determined to trample one another into the ground.”<sup>24</sup> At first, the sultan rejoices seeing his enemies destroy one another, but eventually, he too tires of all the violence and begins to wonder if his presence may be the reason behind all the bloody confrontation. “During my worst hours,” says the Sultan in his prayer, “I am seized by the suspicion that maybe my blood is the origin of all this horror. I know this is a crazed suspicion, and yet, in this nonexistence in which I am, I beg you: Finally grant me oblivion, my Lord! Make them remove my blood from these cold plains.”<sup>25</sup>

As a witness of Balkan violence for generations, that Sultan brings forth a powerful suggestion. He suggests that the reason for the slaughter he has witnessed is not some inherent Balkan “savage[ry],” but rather his Eastern presence. As I have already suggested, the burial of the Sultan’s blood in the Balkans and the blood-union that ensues as a result, is a symbol for the socio-political and cultural unification of the Balkan people with the Ottoman Empire. So one may rephrase the sultan’s question, and pronounce Kadare’s true meaning: instead of being inherent to the Balkans, could it be the case that Balkan violence is only the result of the Ottoman occupation? In which case, the violence is imported from the Ottomans and exclusively tied to their mentality.

The sultan’s sense of guilt suggests that this may be the case. At one point he even encourages the Balkan people to keep attacking one another: “Butcher each other, you Balkan savages,” he calls out from his grave.<sup>26</sup> Later, he curses the Balkan people to a fate of perpetual self-destruction. “A curse upon you, people of the Balkans, who charged me to set out in my old age and lay my life on these plains,” he exhorts.<sup>27</sup> Considering the power that the sultan and Balkan beliefs assign to blood, such a curse assumes great significance. When discussing his predicament as a spirit, the sultan outlines a connection between blood and vengeance and suggests that: “all aberration, memory, fury, and vengeance are imprinted in a man’s blood.”<sup>28</sup> The murdered sultan’s blood is full of vengeance and memory of times past. In light of the sultan’s suggestion that his blood may be to blame for Balkan violence, and since in Balkan culture any blood-union is fundamentally binding, then one can conclude that the sheer injection of foreign blood has altered the land permanently. The rage and desire for vengeance that flow in the sultan’s blood and are stored in the land for centuries, permeate the Balkan soil and define it as a

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 115.

place of violence, while his curse upon the Balkan people similarly pushes the region toward violence.

The Balkan nations are thus dispossessed and partly exculpated of the regional violence that has plagued and stigmatized the region. Implicitly, even the Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s, which served as the inspiration for this tale, is, according to this pattern, similarly resolved by blaming the Eastern other. Or rather, one could say that Kadare blames the violence on an underground, Eastern Balkan self. Because the Sultan's blood is buried deep within the land, so it becomes increasingly challenging to draw the boundaries between an Eastern other and an Eastern self. The Balkans have become blood brothers with the Ottomans, they have grown related and thus to some extent inseparable. So the Easternness blamed for Balkan violence could present itself either in the guise of an occupier or of a self fully possessed by that occupier – a self disfigured through many years of occupation. Though, regardless of the source, the story turns the problem of Balkan violence into a struggle to escape Easternness.

### **Our Original Western Selves**

If the epilogue with the royal prayer and the supplemental report shift the blame for Balkan violence onto Easternness, the rest of the story reaffirms these Orientalist patterns of thinking from a somewhat different perspective. When the minstrels reach Western Europe and receive an audience at the home of a prominent nobleman, Kadare presents an interesting apologia for Balkan violence. The Sultan's prayer is open-ended and subjective enough to leave some room for doubt about the associations between Ottoman presence and Balkan violence. After all, the Sultan points out that the Balkan people had been fighting among one another for some six or seven hundred years before the Ottomans ever reached the region. Yet this pre-Ottoman Balkan violence is given a different spin by the noblewoman in Western Europe who greets the Balkan minstrels with great sympathy.

When she hears the songs of the minstrels, the Western woman compares their epic poetry to Greek tragedies. The minstrels sing about "sacrifices at the foot of bridges, the Furies in the guise of washerwomen on the banks of a river, the idlers in the village coffeehouses, the killer forced to attend the funeral feast of his victim." The motifs and general mood of these songs "bring to mind the Greek tragedies" for the

noblewoman.<sup>29</sup> Listening to the minstrels’ songs, she concludes that Balkan epic poems “are the same diamond dust, the same seed” as Greek tragedy. This argument then leads to a discussion of origins, because if the Balkan epic poems are related to Greek tragedy, then the Balkans must somehow be related to the Hellenic cradle of Western civilization. Quite fittingly, Kadare has the Western woman assert that the “roots that had given birth to everything,” to Europe herself, are in the Balkans.<sup>30</sup>

The Balkan identity is thus defined as eminently European. Their penchant for infighting is merely another iteration of a Greek tragedy, which however terrible, still bears a certain beauty, grandeur, and boldness. While some of the Western Europeans hosting the Balkan minstrels suggest that “hate is all [the Balkans] know,”<sup>31</sup> the explanation provided by the noblewoman helps them and the reader reconceptualize the Balkans as a place of unbridled passions, which nevertheless speaks of the sublimity of the human spirit, at once terrifying and beautiful. The noblewoman shares the reaction of Prince Bayazid at the beginning of the Battle of Kosovo. Mid-conversation, the young prince turns to his Greek tutor and says: “Anastasios...why...despite everything, am I so entranced by their (Balkan) madness?”<sup>32</sup> This Balkan “madness” is made manifest on the battlefield as the Balkan troops appear as a “wild jumble” when compared to the disciplined monotony of Ottoman troops. The Ottoman soldiers have little identity of their own. They march forward with “no distinguishing features, not even a surname.” As the Greek Anastasios suggests, it is these “shadows” who will “face those strutting Balkans and slash their names, their long peacock-tail titles, and ultimately slash their lives.”<sup>33</sup> Though spoken of mockingly by Anastasios, Balkan “madness” is also a form of identification, a way for strong, colorful personalities to assert themselves.

And while Kadare does not explicitly condone Balkan violence, he presents the Balkans as Europeans whose Western inclinations have been disrupted by the Ottoman invasion. Though the violence problem might have been pertinent before the invasion, the problem is not truly crippling until after. Pre-invasion regional altercations between the nationalities, though condemned, are also romanticized and presented as the consequences of an unruly Balkan soul. It is only when the Sultan’s blood is buried in the land that the Balkans acquire their genuine Easternness. With the occupation under way, the region is even named by

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 32.



its enemy, the Ottoman Empire. The name “Balkan” is an Ottoman term that somehow “stuck to [the Balkans] like new scales on the body of an aged reptile.”<sup>34</sup> The Balkans are not so much the Eastern others of Europe, but rather they are coerced into an Eastern identity by the Ottomans. It is this involuntary assumed Easternness, like “new scales in the body of an aged reptile,” that is blamed for the violence plaguing the Balkans.

In this sense, Kadare is essentially extending many cultural myths about Albanian national identity – myths often worked out in his fiction – to the entire peninsula. In works like *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978) and *Who Brought Back Doruntine?* (1979) Kadare recreates cultural paradigms like Frashëri’s about the flourishing medieval Albania, while the Slavs and Greeks are shown as inferior and on a mission to put an end to Albanian progress. Yet perhaps as evidence for the extremely fluid and relative nature of these patterns of “nesting orientalism,” instead of pinning Albania against other Balkan people, Kadare is now giving the entire region the privileged position he granted Albania years earlier. If novels like *The File on H* (1990) showed Albanians as the oldest people in the Balkans, as old as the Homeric epics whose oral tradition is kept alive in the mountains of Albania, in *Elegy for Kosovo* Kadare depicts the whole peninsula as the roots of Europe and of Greek tragedy. The common enemy is now the Turk, and at the face of this much more pervasive Orientalism, the “nestling orientalisms” of the Balkans are put aside.

Moreover, the story recycles the obsession with the West that dominated the post-socialist Albanian mentality. As Fatos Lubonja argues, due to their small territory, Albanians have always needed the alliance or friendship of a larger nation. After the fall of socialism, they attempted to find that friend in the West. In *Elegy for Kosovo* we can sense that this underlying desire to find an ally in the West has been applied to all Balkan nations. At the Western nobleman’s home the Balkan minstrels desperately beg their host not to chase them away. “We want to be like you. We think like you. Don’t drive us away,” they say.<sup>35</sup> Such statements once again reiterate that the Balkans are fundamentally European and should rightfully be part of the Western world. More importantly, however, the image of the minstrels traveling to Europe in order to escape the Eastern victory back home, also seems to be proposing that joining the West – presumably through the EU – may be the only viable solution to more contemporary Balkan problems.

Kadare’s piece shows that Orientalism as a mindset still has the power to both shape the Albanian reaction to and helps interpret for Albanians

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102.

contemporary history, and incidences of violence in particular. More importantly, however, I would suggest that like the original Orientalist discourse, the Orientalist discourse in *Elegy for Kosovo* has both theoretical and practical implications. Saïd argues that discourse and especially literature helped the West dominate the East and shape its reality. “My contention,” he writes, “is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”<sup>36</sup> Orientalism is thus never simple discourse, but could, in some ways, be seen as a type of ‘performative’ discourse that affects cultural perception in order to effect certain socio-political changes. Along these lines, then, and especially because of its timing, Kadare’s *Elegy for Kosovo* is directly attempting to alter public perception both in the Balkans and in the West and thus prepare the ground for future sociopolitical changes.

For one, Kadare distinctly seeks to bring together the Balkan people by essentially transposing their violent past into an Eastern other, thus redirecting their antagonisms and uniting them against a common enemy. If the blame for Balkan conflicts is to be found in the Eastern past, then this realization should provide the impetus for Balkan unity, a sort of unity that Kadare poetically depicts in *Elegy for Kosovo*, and the kind of unity that he hopes can spill from the page into reality. Moreover, the image of the wandering minstrels having to defend their history in front of a Western audience should be seen as Kadare’s way of attempting to shape Western perceptions of the Balkans in the aftermath of a violent conflict in the region. It is for this reason, perhaps, that he makes a Western woman the greatest advocate of the Balkans. Like the minstrels, Kadare faces a Western audience, so he denounces the East, denounces the terrible burdens that history has placed on the Balkans, and declares the Europeanness of the region. In so doing, he hopes to transcend the violent crisis and the consequences that crisis may have in the Western perceptions of the Balkans. Painting the Balkans in the guise of the two wandering minstrels, the author desperately seeks union with the West in hopes of overcoming the Eastern legacy.

In some ways, *Elegy for Kosovo* may have been prophetic because it was precisely at the hands of Western powers that the problem of Kosovo was given a solution recently, a solution more accepted abroad than regionally, but a solution that has not provoked the same violence of the past. But since the solution had to come from outside rather than inside

---

<sup>36</sup> Saïd 3.

the Balkans, one wonders whether by removing accountability from the region about its history, Kadare is not also taking away agency as well.

